



THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

The Employee Assistance Program to help you manage your most valuable resource— Employees

Call EAS: Olympia (360) 753-3260 Seattle (206) 281-6315 Spokane (509) 482-3686
Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. I referred my employee to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) because of his ongoing performance problems; however, the employee returned saying he'd received no EAP recommendations. Frankly, I was surprised. I didn't send performance-related information to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), but would it have made a difference? Why or why not?

A. Providing details about your employee's performance problems plays a substantive role in helping the Employee Assistance Professional determine whether a personal problem affects performance. The lack of this information may have obstructed your EA Professional from determining a personal problem, if one exists. Hearing how the employee explains absenteeism, conduct problems, mistakes, tardiness, trouble with the supervisor, interpersonal conflicts, and other performance shortcomings helps the EA professional gain an accurate understanding of the performance issues, their cause, and whether a personal problem exists. If performance information is unavailable to the EAP, the employee may minimize or deny the severity of performance problems. It is also possible that the employee did not wish to share the recommendation that was given. Confidentiality, including disclosure of recommendations made, is respected and maintained by your EAP.

■ Q. I figure if I start taking progressive disciplinary action for my employee's performance problems, she will eventually quit. I would prefer this outcome rather than having her use the EAP. Am I obligated to make a supervisor referral to the EAP?

A. Although Washington State's EAP policy doesn't mandate supervisors to refer troubled employees, support of the program is expected to effectively manage your employees. Would management support a disciplinary action if you omitted such a reasonable step in resolving an employee problem? Also, consider your ethical obligation to make a supervisor referral. Typically, disciplinary actions and terminations are the least desirable ways in which to solve employee performance problems. Consider talking with the EAP about your feelings concerning this employee, the issues associated with her performance, and your supervision relationship. If your employee is qualified for her position, but is not performing satisfactorily, there is probably a way to help her. The EAP may also help you resolve your issues that lead you to believe the work unit is better off without her.

■ Q. I have an employee with a drinking problem. I know it because, frankly, I also may have a bit of a drinking problem. My drinking doesn't get in the way of my work; however, his does. The problem is how to refer my employee to the EAP without him confronting me.

A. Referring your employee to the EAP does not entail discussing his personal problems, so you should not raise the alcohol issue. Instead, focus on his performance issues. Many supervisors mistakenly believe that they must offer the employee a diagnostic explanation to justify a supervisor referral to the EAP, in addition to the documented job performance problems. Although most supervisors have an idea or can guess the nature of an employee's personal problems, mentioning them is a tactical error in supervisor referrals. Convincing your employee that the personal problem exists then overshadows the performance issue. Discuss your situation with the EAP prior to referral. The EA Professional can give you guidance on what to say and how to say it effectively. The EAP can also give you confidential information, if you desire it, on alcohol use and related health problems for your own benefit.

■ Q. My boss is questioning the poor performance evaluation I gave to my employee because past evaluations have been excellent under other supervisors. She says I have personal issues that interfere with my supervisory skills. Can the EAP help me?

A. You should meet with your supervisor to discuss her concerns about your management style. Write down, or obtain in writing, the specific issues that concern her. Then meet with the EAP. Together, you and the EA Professional can explore the concerns that your supervisor has raised. It is certainly possible that the performance of your employee is different now than it was under past supervisors, or that it was not previously addressed. If so, the EAP can help you consider more effective and objective ways of documenting your observations. It is also possible that you and your supervisor are both correct. She may have legitimate concerns about your management style, but your employee may also have performance problems. The EAP can help you sort out the issues and find strategies for dealing with each.

■ Q. Some of my employees seem to have morale problems. My problem is that "poor morale" is a hard thing to document or describe. Is poor morale something upon which I can base a supervisor referral, or is it a symptom of something else?

A. Morale is an emotional condition of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty of an individual or group. With this definition of morale, it may be something you can't quickly or easily measure. Poor morale affects performance, and it is undesirable, but you are right, it is an issue you can't easily label as a duty, responsibility, or "essential function." You should be concerned about employee morale, but it will be easier to determine what behaviors demonstrate enthusiasm, confidence in the work organization, and loyalty to the work unit or organization (or a lack of these behaviors). Use these measures to intervene, and if necessary make a referral to the EAP. As you endeavor to ensure that individual employees feel good about their jobs, you may discover issues within the work environment over which you have control that also affect morale. Don't overlook interventions that may resolve them. You may consider bringing in an EAS presentation to address the impact of Change, Conflict and Communication.

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<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

